2010

Over Exposure

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"The Expo story that couldn't be printed." That's what editors at Shanghai's City Weekend *magazine found they had on their hands several weeks ago, when Chinese censors deemed the story below "too negative" to run. A revised version was subsequently submitted, approved by the censors, and printed in the January 20, 2010 issue.* City Weekend *decided not to post the original story on its website as planned, as they were told it was inadvisable due to an official caution against publishing media reports critical of the Expo. Here, we are pleased to share with* China Beat *readers the full, uncensored text of Lisa Movius's story.*

By Lisa Movius

The excited LED gleams of countdown clocks in public spaces around Shanghai parallel mental tickers in the minds of many of Shanghai's foreign residents. The latter variety anticipates a later date: when it will all be over. Months before it started, many in our fair city have developed Expo fatigue—even the most enthusiastic Expo boosters have grown weary of psychedelic Haibaos insistently smiling at us with creepy ubiquity.

A profound ambivalence towards the upcoming Expo, however, taps concerns deeper than a visceral visual irritation. All over the city, frantic construction transforms neighborhoods, at the price of air pollution and beloved historic landmarks. Foreigners are the first to admit Expo's obvious benefits, but still lament that the cost goes deeper than the physical. They worry that the pre-Expo whitewashing is creating a Stepford-sanitized, ad-copy vision of a futuristic, international city which is at odds with the quirky, complex urban reality that those of us who live in Shanghai so love.

"Yeah, attitudes are sort of odd," remarks China Environmental Law blogger and international energy and environmental lawyer Charles McElwee. "There is an ambivalence: most of the expat community doesn't know how to feel. It has been so long since the U.S. participated in one that it is out of the consciousness of most Americans. We don't know what to expect."

Sustainability

One of the major Expo themes is ecological sustainability. "Shanghai benefits from the subway construction, the change to cleaner fuel and the cleaning of the air [due to the Expo]," observes McElwee. However, he continues, "There has been so much effort on beautifying the city, so much superficial renovation—but god only knows the quality of the material. There have been these huge efforts to look good. Like the flower boxes to line the streets: they are high-maintenance and non-native. Either they will not be maintained and will look bad, or the city will be saddled with this unsustainable burden."

And, as McElwee points out, "The very notions of Expos are unsustainable: to throw up buildings, then after six to eight months, tear them down again." He explains that, by Expo rules the pavilions must be temporary. To prevent the pavilions and their long-term maintenance from becoming a burden to the host or participating nations; only a handful of Expo structures are slated to stay past the closing date.

He adds that the Expo site is a "brown belt" of former industrial land, and that questions remain about the standards of its clean-up. "Some of it will be converted to residential use—and will it be up to the standards for human health?"

"There is nothing sustainable about a two square mile construction site," grants Expo enthusiast Adam Minter. A journalist who also blogs at ShanghaiScrap.com, Minter has broken a lot of the news and scandal surrounding the U.S. pavilion. "The Expo idea is partly as a laboratory. If you are going to show sustainability, then you need to build something sustainable … On the other hand, if you are going to experiment on urban practices, Shanghai is a good place to start."

Building Boom

Far beyond the fences of the Expo site, the city's slap-dash transformation troubles many. Spiraling property prices and the redevelopment of old neighborhoods have banished many Shanghainese to the suburbs. Those who remain are admonished to abandon traditional practices that are now deemed unsightly, like pajama-wearing and laundry-hanging. Fresh paint has been eagerly if hastily slopped onto seemingly every exterior wall in downtown.

"Walls get painted, but then the paint gets all over the sidewalk. They clean one thing, and get something else dirty," sighs Rebecca Catching, director of Shanghai's OV Gallery, which opens an Expo-themed group exhibition entitled "Make-Over" on January 23. "Like laundry hanging out: it is very sustainable, but officials find it unsightly, while foreigners find it charming or just don't care. There is a lack of consciousness about what is important … It is not just about the fair, but about face—the image that China wants to present to the world. What China wants to project versus what the world wants to see of China is very different."

"China has this complex about being seen as backwards," she continues. "It needs to stop focusing on [physical] infrastructure: it's not about high speed trains or skyscrapers, but people."

Catching cites a work in OV's show by Shanghai-based German designer Jutta Friedrichs, who interviewed street vendors who could be out of work during the Expo. "They are not harming anyone, and tourists like them. No one wants to see a place that is the same as their home, and vendors present Chinese people as hard working and entrepreneurial," she says. Friedrichs collected mundane items from their carts and then sets them in resin covered in wood and concrete. "It is the idea of these colorful and lively things getting paved over, as is always done for big events, like with APEC," Catching explains. "It conveys the paving over of local culture."

"One can look at downright silly 'improvements' that have been made all over the city in terms of beautification before Expo," says Spencer Dodington with an eye-roll. Dodington is an interior designer who meticulously restores old Shanghai buildings to their former glory. He cites as a ready example the "false facades placed on buildings on the Nanjing Dong Lu, with Romanesque columns and other architectural gew-gahs hastily constructed of molded plaster and tacked on top of the original detailing [which] seems doubly sad as it deprives the city of the original look of the underlying structures." The intended transformation of the Bund and the streets behind it into another luxury shopping destination ensures the destruction of the historic Shanghai Rowing Club, saddening many foreign lovers of Shanghai history. Much of Shanghai's original walled city, well pre-dating the concessions, fell to Expo bulldozers. The carnage most lamented among foreigners, though, has been the so-called North Bund redevelopment, which has claimed much of the celebrated former Jewish quarter.

"Preparation for the Expo has been used as an excuse to completely destroy large parts of historic Shanghai," says Dodington. "Most of these buildings—which probably were some of the oldest urban structures in the city—were in Hongkou, between Broadway Mansions and the wartime Stateless Refugee area. This newly created urban space, 'the North Bund', in the end won't raise one kuai for Shanghai during the Expo, as it is years away from completion."

While the Hongkou development may be "heartbreaking", Minter counters that "a lot of it would have happened anyway." He argues, "Shanghai's already Disney—what else is Lujiazui, or Nanjing Lu? The clean-ups probably do not exactly extend to Baoshan. Shanghai will come into its own in 2010 … Shanghai is so absurd on so many levels, with or without the Expo."

The Arts

Rebecca Catching explains that OV decided to do a show around the Expo and urban transformation because, "I think there is an official voice about the Expo, but not much informal dialogue about why do it, and what benefits it brings to the city." She again references a piece of artwork in the show, this time by Shanghai-based American artist Maya Kramer: A stereoscope juxtaposes images of Shanghai's and New York's Expo sites, exploring physical and chronological placement.

"It is very old technology, which premiered at an expo," describes Catching. "The piece is very interesting, because it is an illusion, and presents the idea of near and far. It is a neat metaphor for

the Expo, the passage of time and what will happen after." She muses, "What will happen afterwards? Does our vision stop after opening day? How much does an expo mean after it happens?"

The Expo presents a conundrum for the arts in Shanghai: while a wealth of international act will be shuttled in over the duration, the local scene may largely be shut out. Independent music and theater venues are gnawing their nails over permits and whether or not they will be able to stay open. Performers have been advised of tighter restrictions on permissible content. Visual art venues anticipate fewer difficulties, but remain trepid. Says Catching, if the Expo resembles Beijing's Olympics, then bans on construction and on importing certain materials will be onerous for artistic creation, while getting documents and permits will be made more difficult. "Galleries are ambivalent because few were asked to participate. We were asked [to do an exchange], but they wanted a huge budget…You'd think they would want to showcase Chinese art; they have involved a few individual artists, but they should be asking BizArt, ShanghArt…a lot feel that the Expo is happening on its own," complains Catching. Minter contends that the incoming wealth of international acts will more than compensate. He particularly highlights the many small performers who would not afford to or be allowed to come to China otherwise. By rule, artists brought by national pavilions are exempt from the performance permits otherwise required in China. He adds that a third of the pavilion budgets will be dedicated to programming—not small change. "I do not excuse anything, but I do think there is real value in bringing in all these performing artists who could not come on their own," he says.

Whose Expo?

Minter continues, "Is it a positive for foreigners? I don't know. But for China it is good." "It is estimated that 70 to 90 million people will come, of which 95 percent are Chinese. Five percent will be foreigners, some 3.5 to 4.5 million, which is no more than usually visit Shanghai. It is not for foreigners: there will be this whole wave of Chinese people who have never been to Shanghai, coming to see these 190 plus pavilions or booths designed to impress upon the Chinese what their country is all about. I can't see anything but good coming from that."

Even for those of us for whom Shanghai's rushed rhythms are normal, the city has its moments of surrealism. Whatever else happens during and after, the Expo is certain to be another one, and on a gargantuan scale. Shanghai's foreigners will all enjoy some part of the event—if only because it allows them to indulge in a favorite expat past-time: complaint. Even the transience of the structures has something very Shanghai about it: merrily, merrily, it is like a dream. The real question is what happens after.

Tags: Shanghai Expo 2010

Proper Procedures

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By Shakhar Rahav

The application of justice, or rather its perceived absence, in the People's Republic of China in the past month has been the subject of much commentary in the popular media, as several high-profile cases surfaced. The two most prominent cases concerned a British drug smuggler and a Chinese dissident. On December 29th Akmal Shaikh – a British citizen convicted of smuggling roughly 4kg of heroin into Xinjiang– was executed. Literary critic and well-known dissident Liu Xiaobo was convicted of incitement to subvert state power and sentenced to 11 years in prison. Drawing less attention was a case of an academic, Professor Feng Chongyi, who sued Chinese customs for confiscating books he had in his possession upon his reentry to China after a visit to Hong Kong (detailed accounts and critiques can be found at *Danwei* and *China Daily*, December 24, 2009).

Judging by the various press reports about the cases, Liu Xiaobo's case – following his role in the composition and circulation of "Charter 08" – appears to be the only one that was overtly political; the charter explicitly challenged the existing political system and the political system responded swiftly and harshly. But the other two cases did not challenge the system as such. Shaikh's actions would be illegal in most countries. Feng's books might arguably challenge the party-state's authority, but only

indirectly. What then comes to the fore as the subject is the aspect of procedure (see, for example, Jerome Cohen's "Arbitrary Justice" *South China Morning Post* article from December 23, 2009), leading both critics and supporters of the Chinese government's actions to debate the legality of the cases and whether procedure has been properly followed. Yet why has procedure, rather than justice, emerged as the focus of debate?

If we accept that the Chinese government defines political justice in terms different than those of Western democracies (where the term "democratic dictatorship" – which appears in the conviction of Liu Xiaobo – seems an oxymoron) then there is no real ground for debate. After all, conceptions of justice have to do with fundamental values and assumptions, and it seems that there is clear disagreement about these between Western human-rights activists and the Chinese government. If that's the case, then arguing over issues of justice is futile; and, as so many commentators have done in the past weeks, critics have instead focused on issues of procedure.

Procedure is easier to deal with – it is clearly defined and it is easier and safer to allege that the state deviated from the procedures it has itself defined. Most importantly, focusing on procedure avoids the big questions of values. So even if the state concedes that it deviated from procedure, this will still not disqualify its larger objectives.

Now, justice is of course something quite different from procedure. In a democracy we are devoted to procedure, and it is often on these grounds that criticisms are raised against the Chinese party-state focus on procedure. Why? The premise is that while in a democratic system we might not be able to agree on what is just (Should drugs be legalized? Should drug dealers be jailed or executed?), we can conceivably agree on the legal, political, or bureaucratic procedures that will get us to a decision point.

Laws and procedures form a convenient focus for debate because they allow dissidents and critics to point out the disparity between the state's own image of itself (e.g. a law-abiding, just, embodiment of a nation) and reality and use that gap to put pressure on the state without actually challenging the state's right to rule. Both sides can thus avoid a "showdown" situation.

The post-Mao reforms entailed adopting, formalizing, and publicizing procedures, which gives citizens recourse to the law. This often meant trying to hold the state true to its stated procedures. The adoption of procedures does impose some restrictions on authority and office-holders, but the outcome of procedures remains subject to manipulation. This becomes clear if, for instance, we try to think when – despite cases in which citizens, such as professor Feng, try to use the law and occasionally even sue government organs – did we last hear of a stinging rebuke of the Chinese state from one of its courts?

One way for the state to defend itself from excessively critical citizens who object to certain policies is to reinforce nationalism and the image of the party-state as loyal representative of the nation. Nationalist feelings have been promoted by the state for several years – witness, for example, the finely orchestrated ecstatic celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the PRC, or the national sentiments invested in hosting the Olympics. This gives the party-state legitimacy to manipulate outcomes of procedure in its favor. Thus, even if Mr. Shaikh was not treated exactly properly, this is dwarfed by the foreign attempt to intervene in Chinese sovereignty, as some Chinese responses have alleged.

State legitimacy will be threatened only if a large number of Chinese see their individual welfare threatened. The market reforms that fragment society into niches make this unlikely – since for every citizen who feels hurt by certain reforms, another citizen profits from them. Thus, even if critics successfully argue that the state failed to live up to its own procedures and did not grant Akmal Shaikh a fair trial, or that customs officials were over-zealous in confiscating Professor Feng's books, the public will remain indifferent. After all, who cares about a British (shades of the Opium War!) drug-smuggler? Who but a handful of academics cares about confiscating scholarly books?

Allegations against the state for failing to live up to its perceived image can emerge local and small-scale protests (from the riots two years ago in Weng'an to the protests after the Sichuan earthquake over shoddy school construction). And in these cases procedure is pursued as if it was supposed to provide justice, its absence leading to state failings.

Yet some cases can even lead to support for illegal actions. For instance, AP reports that a young man in northern China has been sentenced to death for murdering a hated and allegedly corrupt local village official, yet that 20,000 local residents have petitioned the court for a more lenient sentence (Gillian Wong, "China teen seen as hero for killing local official" *Washington Post*, January 20, 2010). It seems then that when perceptions of justice are unequivocally clear, procedure may once again be marginalized in favor of justice.

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